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The Road from Antipinkwashing Activism to the Decolonization of Palestine

Lynn Darwich and Haneen Maikey

The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) articulates a firm stand against sexism in movements for Black liberation and racism in white women's movements in the United States. It is a compelling and inspiring call by Black feminists to dismantle interlocking sociopolitical and economic systems of oppression, namely capitalism, imperialism, racism, and patriarchy. The statement reflects a tense political moment in which a set of principles for consciousness-raising and political engagement are discerned for the sake of the liberation of all oppressed people. Oppressions experienced by Black women, and lesbians in particular, are centered in the statement, especially, says the Combahee River Collective, as "the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression." Now, more than four decades later, anchoring one's political work in personal and collective experiences of oppression is as relevant and meaningful.

In our own organizing toward the decolonization of Palestine, and with the rise of antipinkwashing activism, both nationalist and identity-based forms of political organizing have continually been questioned and contested for their inherent limitations in forging strong coalitional politics. After all, antipinkwashing activism did not emerge within a vacuum but as a response to Israel's use of gay culture and rights to distract from and normalize Israeli occupation, settler colonialism, and apartheid. It is at the intersection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer movements and the Palestine solidarity movement. Before antipinkwashing, these two movements had rarely been perceived as ones that could potentially connect

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or interact. As a result of this binary understanding, antipinkwashing has been formulated as a new form of organizing, a new tactic, aimed to reform both movements: adding a bit of "solidarity" to LGBT movements and a little "gayness" to Palestine solidarity work. But is the task of antipinkwashing activism to politicize LGBT movements, or is antipinkwashing an attempt to queer up Palestine solidarity movements? In other words, does antipinkwashing have the potential to expand beyond these limitations and become, not a reformist, but a radically transformative strategy?

Nearly four years have passed since the launch of antipinkwashing campaigns the world over. Since then, we've seen pro-Israel organizations counterattack with much anticipated allegations of anti-Semitism and racism, we've witnessed organized efforts against Israeli pinkwashing from an antiwar/antiracism lens, and we've also taken note that many LGBT activists and groups have integrated antipinkwashing within the framework of international gay solidarity activism. Aside from Palestinian Queers for BDS (pqbds.com) and alQaws (alqaws.org), both in Palestine, and a network of Arab activists, mainly through Pinkwatching Israel (pinkwatchingisrael.com), most initiatives have sprung within the global North. Antipinkwashing activism has rapidly become a striking and tense embodiment of all the questions that could emerge (or rather erupt) from the nexus of sexualized, gendered, and racialized politics within a modern gay transnational solidarity movement.

In light of emerging politics of solidarity and our inherently different positionalities, would it be useful to assume that everyone in this movement is here for the same reasons and is fighting for the same cause? Does "gayness" charge our activism, and if yes, toward what, and how? The Combahee River Collective Statement, for example, contextualizes and centers Black lesbian sexuality within wider movements in order to disrupt the heterosexism, racism, and economic oppressions circulating in those movements. Sexual orientations, however, in their contemporary depoliticized and neoliberal forms, cannot but narrow and limit antipinkwashing as a transnational solidarity movement. Framing antipinkwash activism through the familiar mainstream LGBT lens does not work: sexual orientations and gender identities cannot be the sole driving forces through which we relate to antipinkwashing efforts, especially as this takes away the focus from the central issue of Palestine. This is because pinkwashing in itself relies heavily on the logic of "gay rights" as it is commonly understood and practiced—a single-issue struggle based on one's sexual identity

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to the exclusion of a range of interconnected categories of identification, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, nation, and so on. It reinforces the isolation of gay identities and conceals the structural inequalities that make certain (Jewish, Israeli) bodies and identities "acceptable" and others (Palestinian, Arab) not. Also, this limited focus on gay rights in the context of Israel, and in isolation, almost neglects all the intense forms of gendered and racialized sexual regulation frequently practiced by the Israeli state. One example is the Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law (Temporary Order since 2003) that bars Palestinians married to Israelis from becoming citizens, ultra-Orthodox Jewish campaigns for gender segregation in public spaces, and the denial of Jewish-Jewish marriages inside Israel unless the couple is "converted" according to Orthodox principles.[1]

As a result, antipinkwashing must be committed to the ongoing process of unpacking its initial mode of activism that relies on "gay" identities, personal experiences, and politics.[2] The tension emerging from LGBT solidarity with Palestine, as well as the focus on queer experiences in Palestine, or on Palestinian queer lives in particular, is evident. This leads us to ask, Are we in solidarity with Palestine and the Palestinians, or with the queers in Palestine? It would be an error to promote antipinkwashing activism as a new salvation for the somehow boring mainstream LGBT organizing. Rather, the question is how queer analysis is also responsible for resisting Israel's Zionist project and its manifestations, from ethnic cleansing and occupation to apartheid and colonialism. And how we, those in solidarity with this struggle, can understand and navigate through our inevitable complicity with neoliberal constructs of gender and sexuality, and with the Israeli occupation.

Now is the moment for a paradigm shift in the ways through which we make sense of our efforts in leading the struggle against Israeli pinkwashing. Instead of building a reactionary movement whose sole task is to respond to and disrupt Israel's use of gay culture and rights, we must invest in building proactive long-term strategies under the unifying vision of decolonization and liberation. All our efforts must contribute to the struggle for the liberation of Palestine, as well as the dismantling of Zionism as a racist and colonial project and a machine of Western imperialism. Our task now is to embed our analyses of pinkwashing within a broader critique and disruption of Israeli colonialism and to frame these efforts within the interconnected frameworks of homonationalism, cultural imperialism, and settler colonialism. This type of solidarity work includes supporting

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widespread indigenous struggles against ongoing legacies of genocide and settler colonialism.

We cannot nurture this movement and move forward without historically informed and honest processes of self-reflection. Palestine is not a cool pin on our backpacks. Antipinkwashing and Palestine solidarity are not markers that we're doing things right. Pinkwashing is not isolated from the larger colonial Zionist project, and we cannot fight pinkwashing without challenging its hidden notion of mainstream gay politics and reframing it as a struggle against colonialism and Zionism and its different manifestations. The tension around what is perceived as the real cause fueling this movement has created a range of divisive questions and unresolved issues throughout the past four years. Unfortunately, these issues have hardly been touched upon in constructive ways that could contribute directly to the growth of our work. In reality, all these questions and the connections that are made, as well as the struggles we all passionately advocate for, are real issues affecting the daily lives, choices, and experiences of many.

With antipinkwash organizing, we do not have the luxury to doubt whether or not the movement must be framed as such, especially as gender and sexuality are continually used as markers of modernity and have been instruments in processes of colonialism. With its racist and dehumanizing intentions, pinkwashing is built upon a historically specific colonial logic of Zionist Israeli Jewish supremacy. Exposing this logic and emphasizing other (ab)uses of gender and sexuality in the service of Zionism are essential to the broader project of decolonizing ourselves. The real challenge now is to tackle these divisive issues while ensuring that the movement can still contain such transformative discussions and grow through them.

A crucial step is to reflect on our own experiences, especially ones that have shaped our intimate and political contributions to this movement. Another is to invest in historically informed conversations that would slowly and gently expand this movement's boundaries. In doing so, we begin the very important project of theorizing our experiences with organizing. Such processes lead us toward exploring the often regulatory and divisive sexual politics overwhelming our activism. It is with a deep and conscious commitment to resist sexual, racial, and class hegemonies that new understandings and possibilities of decolonization can emerge.

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Notes

1. For the Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law, see Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel n.d.
2. See Darwich and Maikey 2011. For unpacking homophobia as a universal strategy and struggle, see also Maikey and Shamali 2011.

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